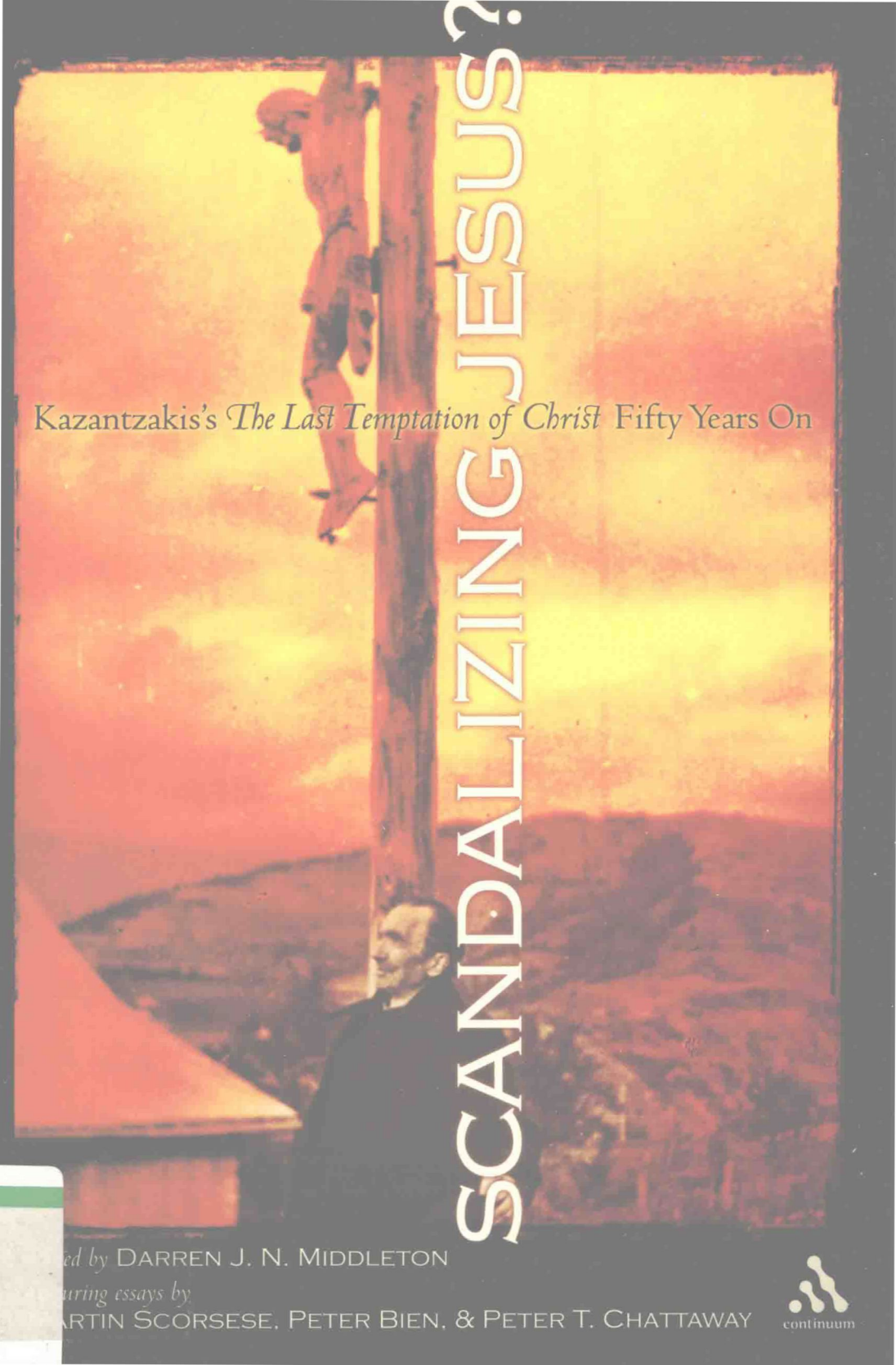
SCANDALIZING JESUS?
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ed by DARREN J. N. MIDDLETON
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continuum

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Fifty Years On

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Featuring essays by
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NEW YORK • LONDON

The Continuum International Publishing Group, 15 East 26th Street, New York, NY 10010

The Continuum International Publishing Group Ltd, The Tower Building, 11 York Road, London SE1 7NX

Cover art courtesy of Dr. Patroclos Stavrov
Cover design by Lee Singer

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Scandalizing Jesus? : Kazantzakis's The last temptation of Christ fifty years on / edited by Darren J. N. Middleton.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 0-8264-1607-1 (pbk. : alk. paper) — ISBN 0-8264-1606-3 (casebound with jacket : alk. paper)
1. Kazantzakis, Nikos, 1883–1957. O teleftaíos peirasmós. 2. Kazantzakis, Nikos, 1883–1957—Characters—Jesus Christ. 3. Jesus Christ—In literature. I. Middleton, Darren J. N., 1966–
PA5610.K39T4325 2005
889'.332—dc22

2005006615
Printed in the United States of America

01 02 03 04 05 06 07 08 09 10 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

TO IVA LOU HILL AND ROBERT E. FLOWERS,

who have taught me more about Jesus

than I could say here or anywhere

Don Cupitt

In the writings of Darren J. N. Middleton, Lewis Owens, and others, we have in recent years seen signs of a revival of interest in Nikos Kazantzakis (1883–1957). This is very welcome, not only because of Kazantzakis's value as a lay religious thinker but also because—perhaps like Nietzsche, Dostoyevsky, and Unamuno—he is one of those representative figures who has struggled on our behalf to make sense out of the many conflicting strands in modern Western culture.

Nietzsche, whom Kazantzakis admired so much, illustrates the problem very well. Descended from a line of Lutheran pastors, classically educated, and with a period of military service, he was also a product of our modern liberal-democratic, commercial-industrial culture. And he was much affected by Darwinism. Now, how on earth do you make a morally coherent worldview and personal way of life out of those five quite different value scales?

Kazantzakis, being a Greek, is roughly halfway between Germany and Russia in the way he experiences these conflicts. He is highly aware of the contrast between the compassionate religious humanism of the New Testament (itself another Greek book, to him) and the heroic humanism of Homer: Jesus versus Odysseus, as he puts it. And Kazantzakis is just as vividly aware of the conflict between the timeless and basically supernaturalist idea of truth taught by Plato and the Greek Church, and the historically evolving picture of reality that underlies all modern culture since Hegel. Cosmology, geology, biology are *historical* now, and so are all the human sciences. Must we now learn to think of truth as being not eternal but historical?

These two great conflicts are felt particularly acutely by Kazantzakis because he is himself a Greek. But there is also a third conflict that he gets involved in because he is a novelist: Given the way we now think about "human nature," and given the Church's insistence on Jesus' full humanity, how are we to think about Jesus' human subjectivity—*including* his sexuality?

That topic is trouble, big trouble, as everyone knows. Especially, Martin Scorsese knows. But the very fact that the topic causes so much trouble is all the more reason that it deserves a lot of attention, and we can only be grateful that Kazantzakis had not only larger-than-life literary talent but also larger-than-life courage. We should be grateful, too, that Scorsese managed to get his film made and issued. One wonders whether the studio would back such a risky project with the same determination today, in the much-less-liberal times in which we live now.

I have spent my "career" (such as it was) as a priest and an academic, and I have to admit that technically proficient academic priest-theologians tend to look down on lay religious thinkers, mere literary types such as Kazantzakis. But in the long run, experience has suggested to me that the academic priest-theologians are chiefly interested in defending tradition, the power of the Church, and the interests of the clerical profession. All of this means that their work is much less interesting to the general public, and less interesting to *me*, too, than the work of figures like Kazantzakis. Fifty years ago, we tended to refer to such people as "religious existentialists," and at least a dozen of them were well-known to the public. Do you remember, for example, Berdyayev, Marcel, Weil? Today, sadly, there are few such figures. Updike, maybe? Otherwise, religion is nowadays chiefly discussed not as an intellectually and morally vital subject for everyone but as a rather crazed militant quasi-political ideology, much involved in provoking savage conflicts all around the world. Today, religion is almost nowhere a blessing, and almost everywhere a curse.

That is a profoundly discouraging thought. I hope that books like this will prompt many people to take up again the kind of serious lay thinking about religion, morality, and worldview that so consumed Nikos Kazantzakis. Many of the contributors were at a lively conference about him at Canterbury Christ Church University College, which I happened to attend a few years ago. I am glad for the chance to greet them again and to commend this book warmly.

Don Cupitt
Emmanuel College, Cambridge
April 2004

The idea for this celebratory and critical anthology was sparked by a Kazantzakis conference I attended in Canterbury, England, December 2002. Lewis Owens, inaugural president of the UK branch of the International Society of Friends of Nikos Kazantzakis, organized and convened this event. Lewis and Peter Bien initially encouraged this undertaking, which was then refined and enriched by dialogue with other friends in the world of Kazantzakis scholarship, including Daniel Dombrowski, Howard Dossor, Jen Harrison, Vrasidas Karalis, Gareth Owens, Patroclos Stavrou, and Vasiliki Tsakali.

Meg McCarthy of Cappa Productions helped me establish contact with Martin Scorsese. For his part, Mr. Scorsese generously agreed to step aside from his busy filming schedule to offer some reflections on his cinematic adaptation of Kazantzakis's novel. I am delighted to include such thoughts in our volume.

For the use of the Kazantzakis photographs, I thank my dear friend Patroclos Stavrou—the very model of kindness and cooperation.

Special mention must be made of Austin S. Lingerfelt, my former student assistant, who proofread many essays, cataloged various newspaper articles, and compiled the webliography that appears at the end of this anthology. Most of all, though, I value his comment in my Christianity and Literature class, where he first discovered Kazantzakis: "Any person who reads this novel with an open heart will find themselves born again!" And this from the mouth of a Texas Pentecostal preacher's kid! Thank you, Austin, for shattering a stereotype. My current student assistant, Megan A. Johnson, provided much-needed, last-minute help with the "For Further Reading" section, for which I am grateful.

I owe a word of appreciation to my colleagues in the Religion department at Texas Christian University, especially S. Brent Rodriguez-Plate and Daryl D. Schmidt, for

their friendship and support across the years. Further, I would be remiss in not crediting my many students; several have challenged me to refine, sometimes even abandon, my various interpretations of Kazantzakis's literary art.

Henry Carrigan, my Continuum editor, has been an ardent supporter of this project. His close reading has greatly improved the book. Any remaining errors are my own. I also thank Ryan Masteller for his industry and verve.

I acknowledge with gratitude the following permissions for quotations: Kazantzakis Publications (Athens) for all Greek texts authored by Nikos Kazantzakis and/or his wife, Eleni Kazantzaki (= Helen Kazantzakis), and Simon & Schuster (USA) for *The Last Temptation of Christ*.

Finally, I recognize Betsy, my wife, with deep and lasting appreciation for our first ten years of married life.

Darren J. N. Middleton
Lent 2005

Each essayist in this volume has made every effort to clarify the referent when writing about Nikos Kazantzakis's novel and/or Martin Scorsese's film. Generally, Kazantzakis's imaginative re-creation of Jesus' life, *O teleftaíos peirasmós* (*The Last Temptation*) was completed in 1951 and published in Greek in 1955. The Greek title does not include "of Christ." Translated into English by Peter Bien in 1960, *O teleftaíos peirasmós* appeared as *The Last Temptation* in the United Kingdom and *The Last Temptation of Christ* in the United States. Martin Scorsese's 1988 cinematic adaptation of Kazantzakis's text uses the American title of the novel.

Some contributors to this anthology cite the Greek text of Kazantzakis's novel, albeit sparingly, and/or use other specialized Greek words, phrases, or expressions. When they do, each writer uses the (phonetic) transliteration scheme developed by *The Journal of Modern Greek Studies* with slight vaviations.

Literary Lord, Screen Savior

Darren J. N. Middleton

Of the Devil's Party

Cretans buried their native son Nikos Kazantzakis (1883–1957) on November 5, 1957. Forming a grand funeral procession, thousands accompanied his body as it was taken from Heraklion's St. Minas's Cathedral to the Martinengo rampart on the Venetian walls. Local students held copies of Kazantzakis's books as they walked directly behind the coffin. In sketching the scene for the periodical *Spitha*, the Archdean Augustinos Kantiotis depicted Satan as leading the students. Grinning impishly, Satan clutches his own copy of *O teleftaíos peirasmós* (*The Last Temptation* [*of Christ*]).[1] This sketch has haunted me for years. Whenever my literature students are tempted to think that fiction is a neutral territory upon which all educated people can stand and debate openly, I show them Kantiotis's cartoon.

As my students soon discover, compelling storytelling is frequently subversive, even threatening, and often likely to incite others. But this is perhaps as it should be. Persuasive fiction habitually protests easy solutions, time-worn moralities, and prevailing orthodoxies. It resists tradition's tyranny, or whatever it is that holds us in thrall to the past, functioning like an ax for the frozen sea within.[2] Poets and writers often find that they must attend the devil's party before conjuring those characters who pose difficult questions about life, reality, meaning, and God.[3] As critic Frederic Koeppel writes:

> We turn to great literature—all great art—for the challenge of complexity, for the shock of recognition, for the bracing bath of humanity in all its weakness and greed and illicit longing, qualities that may not get us into heaven but certainly make for the exquisite and heartbreaking tensions great art requires, not to mention providing a rip-roaring reading. . . . The (author's) wisdom lies in the telling, in the narrative, in

> language itself, and it forms a kind of powerful morality of choice that draws us to literature, even to the same books, over and over again.[4]

Behind Kantiotis's sarcastic sketch lies an anxious attitude toward art and literature, one that seems as real today as it did upon Kazantzakis's death in 1957. Published in 1955, Kazantzakis's *The Last Temptation* remains one of the most controversial novels of the twentieth century. Lured by a "powerful morality of choice," the essayists featured here have reread and reappreciated this modern literary classic as it celebrates its fiftieth anniversary. Before I introduce their contibutions, however, some commentary on what I refer to as Kazantzakis's reverence for Jesus seems in order.

Kazantzakis's Reverence for Jesus

Arguments about Kazantzakis's religiosity began in 1930 when, not long after he published *The Saviors of God: Spiritual Exercises*, some contemporaries accused him of atheism. A trial date was then set. Although he was never summoned, opposition to his ideas subsequently intensified. In 1953 several religious leaders censured Kazantzakis for scandalizing the Church's official teaching (both Orthodox and Catholic).[5] Hostilities culminated with the Greek publication of *The Last Temptation* in 1955. While most of Kazantzakis's texts courted controversy, *The Last Temptation* was the only one listed in the Vatican's Index of Forbidden Texts.[6]

Given such ecclesiastical resistance, it is understandable why later Christians have continued to dismiss Kazantzakis. But if we read his writings closely, we discover that Kazantzakis approaches Jesus reverentially. Consider the following notebook entry, composed after hearing the twelve Gospels of Holy Thursday, March 1915:

> Great emotion in church. The Crucified seemed to me more mine, more myself. I felt the "suffering God" deeply within me and said: May the Resurrection come with perseverance, love, and effort. Joy, victory over passion, dematerialization, freedom. Simplicity and serenity, composed of the essence of all the passions, which have been subordinated to the divine Eye. Spirit like light and like the clear water of the fountain.[7]

Kazantzakis holds that our best attributes are to be found in Jesus of Nazareth's life and teaching. In both his love for God and his behavior toward others, Jesus exemplifies our ideal. But since Jesus' message requires our inner evolution, our being born again, so to speak, Jesus also challenges us to follow him, making our ideal real. Kazantzakis confesses:

> I kept gazing at Christ's virile, ascetic figure in the gentle glow of the cressets. [Here Kazantzakis writes about venerating the sacred icons at St. Catherine's Monastery in the Sinai desert.] Perceiving the slender hands which maintained a firm grip on the

> world and kept it from falling into chaos, I knew that here on earth, for the full span of our lives, Christ was not the harbor where one casts anchor, but the harbor from which one departs, gains the offing, encounters a wild, tempestuous sea, and then struggles for a lifetime to anchor in God. Christ is not the end, He is the beginning. He is not the "Welcome!" He is the "Bon voyage!" He does not sit back restfully in soft clouds, but is battered by the waves just as we are, His eyes fixed aloft on the North Star, His hands firmly on the helm. That was why I liked Him; that was why I would follow him.
>
> What attracted me and gave me courage above everything else was how—with what striving and derring-do, what frantic hope—the person who found himself in Christ set out to reach God and merge with Him, so that the two might become indissolubly one. There is no way to reach God but this. Following Christ's bloody tracks, we must fight to transubstantiate the man inside us into spirit, so that we may merge with God.[8]

By "bloody tracks," Kazantzakis means Christ's struggle as revealed in his temptations. Like us, Jesus was tempted. But since Jesus did not succumb to the devil's snare, Kazantzakis thinks that we can draw strength from Jesus' example.[9] As the focal instance of the divine-human person, Jesus is the firstborn son of salvation. Victorious in his own ascent to God, Jesus now beckons us to the lofty peak, which is union with the divine: *theōsis*. Whenever we heed Jesus' call, a deepening of God's incarnation occurs, or as Kazantzakis puts it, we show that "a Messiah is always on the march."[10]

There can be little doubt that *The Last Temptation* is a controversial novel. But we need not disbelieve—or, as with Kantiotis, discredit—Kazantzakis's reverence for Jesus, even if we must acknowledge that he did not label himself "Christian." As this brief section shows, he approaches his subject with passionate spiritual feeling:

> This book [*The Last Temptation*] is not a biography; it is the confession of every man who struggles. In publishing it I have fulfilled my duty, the duty of a person who struggled much, was much embittered in his life, and had many hopes. I am certain that every free man who reads this book, so filled as it is with love, will more than ever before, better than ever before, love Christ.[11]

Fifty Years Later

Nearly fifty years after *The Last Temptation*'s publication, the essayists of *Scandalizing Jesus?* reassess both the novel and its 1988 cinematic adaptation (*The Last Temptation of Christ*) by Martin Scorsese. The anthology is divided into two parts. In the first, "Literary Lord," contributors focus on Kazantzakis and the novel. The first three essays here consider Kazantzakis's primary sources in writing *The Last Temptation*. Peter Bien indicates that Kazantzakis read Ernest Renan's *Vie de Jésus* (1863)

very carefully in October 1950, copying long passages into the special notebook that he was using for his then-new project. Renan's influence was pervasive. Yet Bien insists that we must not overstate it. Perhaps Renan merely reinforced ideas that Kazantzakis had developed on his own. Following Bien, W. Barnes Tatum acknowledges that *The Last Temptation* possesses its own integrity as a literary work. However, he maintains that Kazantzakis's retelling of the Jesus story draws upon the four canonical Gospels alongside issues raised during the continuing two-hundred-year historical quest for Jesus. That Kazantzakis's novel reflects a sensitivity to historical-Jesus issues becomes understandable when one recognizes that he admired Renan's work and shared a personal friendship with Albert Schweitzer—towering figures in what has become known as the quest of the historical Jesus. In his essay, Lewis Owens analyzes Kazantzakis's notebooks, especially his marginalia, and shows that Carl Gustav Jung's influence is to be found not only in Jesus' characterization, which is predominantly Freudian, but also in the portrayal of Pontius Pilate. Like Bien and Tatum before him, Owens's source criticism provides an invaluable insight into the primary literature and philosophy that shaped Kazantzakis's thought during his novel's composition.

The next three, more speculative essays establish connections between Kazantzakis, *The Last Temptation*, and Christianity. Daniel Dombrowski explores orthodoxy and heterodoxy in Kazantzakis's fictional Christology. He argues that it can most profitably be seen as a contemporary version of Monophysitism (from the ancient Greek: *mon-* [one] + *physis* [nature]), holding that Jesus has one nature. Although this view is at odds with what has been traditionally seen as the orthodox, Chalcedonian view (Jesus' having two distinct natures), Dombrowski thinks it is nonetheless a more defensible view of Jesus in light of the recent revolt against dualism. Kazantzakis, then, helps us to see the inadequacies of a two-tiered view of the universe and of Jesus wherein the "supernatural" is arbitrarily inserted into the natural world or invades it. Pamela Francis demonstrates how Kazantzakis's Jesus exemplifies the mysticism of the Orthodox Fathers, especially that of the Cappadocian Gregory of Nyssa. For Francis, Kazantzakis and Gregory's views are parallel in their understandings of God, humanity, and Christ. Her analysis of Gregory's writing in relation to the Greek Orthodox tradition yields a fresh understanding of Kazantzakis's own relationship to that tradition, and in turn its relation to the other strains of thought found in *The Last Temptation*. Vrasidas Karalis examines some of these strains as seen in the christological debates of the early Church. He holds that Kazantzakis's Jesus models the concept of theandric union as framed but not fully articulated by the ecumenical councils.

Roderick Beaton then turns us toward a more non-Christian reading of *The Last Temptation*. First, he questions the conventional assumption that "Jesus" and "Christ" are one and the same person for Kazantzakis. In an even bolder move, he claims that the last temptation was not so much a temptation as a dream or even an alternative reality. Finally, he compares Kazantzakis's novel with Jorge Luis Borges's

fictional texts, texts that lead away from Christianity, and thus he attempts to move our own interpretations of *The Last Temptation* in a similar direction.

After Beaton, C. D. Gounelas gives a Platonic reading of *The Last Temptation*, which sees Kazantzakis as exploring the question of how matter and spirit harmonize in a World-Psyche. References to Plato, Angelos Sikelianós, and Édouard Schuré on Jesus provide a context of mystical insight toward which Kazantzakis's novel seems to be reaching, Gounelas says.

Both Charitini Christodoulou and Jen Harrison see *The Last Temptation* through a feminist lens. Christodoulou draws heavily upon Julia Kristeva's work on the struggle between the symbolic and the semiotic to analyze Jesus' relationship with his mother and Mary Magdalene. Taking cues from Rosemary Radford Ruether, Elizabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza, and Marcus Borg, Harrison claims that Kazantzakis's trinity of Marys encapsulates the range of misogynist myths and fears about women, highlighting the humanness of the pre-Easter Jesus and humanity's fundamental need of redemption. Redeemed man, of course, bears no such fear of woman, since in Christ the two are equal.

Mini Chandran closes the first part of *Scandalizing Jesus?* by examining *The Last Temptation*'s impact in Kerala, an area of India with a strong Christian presence. Given its highly combustible religious elements, India has never reacted kindly to scriptural reconfigurations. As she recounts, many Indian religious leaders reacted with outrage over Kazantzakis's novel and its manifestation in a street play. Chandran concludes by pointing to similar reactions to Aubrey Menen's *Rama Retold* and Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*.

Recognizing that Martin Scorsese's cinematic adaptation of Kazantzakis's novel has been a significant part of *The Last Temptation*'s reception history since the film's release in 1988, the essays in part 2, "Screen Savior," critically reassess this landmark event. Elizabeth H. Flowers and Darren J. N. Middleton explore evangelical reaction to Scorsese's film. Focusing on Texas, they argue that evangelical critique can actually better help us understand the human side of Kazantzakis's/Scorsese's Jesus. Middleton and Flowers indicate that sex, the ultimate temptation of Jesus to engage in sex with Mary Magdalene, forms an important part of Texas evangelical critique of *The Last Temptation of Christ*. In the next essay, however, Peter Chattaway argues that Scorsese emphasized sex as "the last temptation" to a greater degree than Kazantzakis's novel, and that those who protested the film focused on it almost exclusively. Yet for Chattaway, the irony is that both the film and its protestors hold sexuality and spirituality as mutually incompatible.

Following Chattaway, Lloyd Baugh questions this focus on sexuality, which tends to overlook Kazantzakis's/Scorsese's deeply problematic anthropology and Christology. While highlighting their weaknesses, Baugh maintains that the novel and film are nonetheless capable of stimulating believers to think theologically. Melody D. Knowles and Allison Whitney share Baugh's final point. As teachers at Chicago's McCormick Theological Seminary, they chart their students' surprising reactions to

their classroom use of Scorsese's film. Overall, they argue for its pedagogical potential in raising issues that are often left unaddressed in the training of clergy.

The next two essays grapple with the relationship between word, sound, and image in Kazantzakis's/Scorsese's artwork. Randolph Jordan shows how cinema's dual sound/image apparatus enhances our understanding of Christ's own duality. According to Jordan, Scorsese's film achieves a truly unified medium where the auditory and the visual are understood as two parts of the same thing, just as God the Father and God the Son are one and the same. Eftychia Papanikolaou explores how Peter Gabriel's sound track to *The Last Temptation of Christ* highlights the ideological bond between Kazantzakis and Scorsese. As she maintains, the music becomes a third voice that acts as a bridge between author and filmmaker. Although vital as an autonomous and abstract work of art, the music is inextricably infused with the same dialectic that penetrates the film's narrative, that between flesh and spirit, the human and the divine.

The last word in *Scandalizing Jesus?* goes to Martin Scorsese. Scorcese looks at the years between his first reading of the novel in 1973 and his film's release in 1988. The result is an honest self-profile. Scorsese contemplates what inspired him to make the film and touches upon the surrounding controversy. In the end, though, he moves beyond himself to offer hope that now, in the early part of the twenty-first century, we are perhaps finally ready to reappreciate *The Last Temptation.*

Conclusion

According to the Nobel Prize–winning South African writer J. M. Coetzee, "The classic defines itself by surviving." After fifty years of heated debate, Kazantzakis's novel is still going strong. It continues to provoke, agitate, and excite persons of faith and those of no faith. While some see it as an example of satanic arrogance, others view it as part of their outlook on God. Either way, people continue to bring to it questions whose answers do not come easily. In one sense, then, there is no real difference between Kantiotis's hostile sketch and our own broadly celebratory volume. As Coetzee says, "The interrogation of the classic, no matter how hostile, is part of the history of the classic, inevitable and even to be welcomed. For as long as the classic needs to be protected from attack, it can never prove itself classic." On such grounds, the critic is "duty-bound to interrogate the classic." The essayists of *Scandalizing Jesus?* have tried to discharge this duty as we approach the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of Nikos Kazantzakis's classic *O teleftaíos peirasmós.*[12]

Notes

1. The sketch is reproduced in George I. Panagiotakis, *The Life and Works of Nikos Kazantzakis*, trans. Ioannis Panagiotis (Heraklion, Crete: Typokreta, 2002), 308.

2. The phrase belongs to Franz Kafka. See Joyce Carol Oates, "The Importance of Childhood," in *The Writing Life: Writers on How They Think and Work*, ed. Marie Arana (New York: PublicAffairs, 2003), 15.

3. Here I am paraphrasing William Blake's famous remark about John Milton's being "of the Devil's party without knowing it."

4. Frederic Koeppel, "It's Fiction; What's Goodness Got to Do with It?" *The Commercial Appeal* (Memphis), Sunday, September 29, 1996, G2.

5. The details are so well documented that it seems unnecessary to rehearse them in this introduction. For more information, see the essays in Darren J. N. Middleton and Peter A. Bien, eds., *God's Struggler: Religion in the Writings of Nikos Kazantzakis* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1996).

6. See Helen Kazantzakis, *Nikos Kazantzakis: A Biography Based on His Letters*, trans. Amy Mims (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1968), 524.

7. Ibid., 58.

8. Nikos Kazantzakis, *Report to Greco*, trans. Peter Bien (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1965), 289.

9. Nikos Kazantzakis, *The Last Temptation of Christ*, trans. Peter Bien (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1960), 1–4.

10. Helen Kazantzakis, *Biography*, 496. Cf. N. Kazantzakis, *Last Temptation*, 227. Also see 2 Cor 6:16–18 and Heb 2:10–18; 4:15.

11. Nikos Kazantzakis, *Last Temptation*, 2–3. Also see H. Kazantzakis, *Biography*, 505–6.

12. J. M. Coetzee, *Stranger Shores: Literary Essays, 1986–1999* (New York: Viking, 2001), 16.